

# CHEROKEE AND CREEK LEGENDS

The following two stories are legends from the Cherokee and Creek Indians. After reading the two stories, use one or more of the exercises below to further understanding of the stories and cultures.

## ***1. Theater in the Classroom***

Storytelling was an important part of Native American culture. The legends of these people were passed down for years from one generation to the next through storytelling until they learned a written language and could write them down. This exercise focuses on the spoken storytelling traditions of the Cherokee and Creek Indians.

Divide the class in half, and assign each half one of the legends to interpret in a theatrical presentation. If the class is small, let the students choose which story to act out. Have the children write out their parts on index cards if necessary, and provide or let them create costumes if time permits. Let the groups perform for each other or for other classes.

## ***2. Legends in Your Culture***

Encourage your students to think of legends they know about. For example, Paul Bunyan and Rip Van Winkle. Some of our most common tales are known as “Urban Legends,” and are of the scary variety. Or perhaps your students have heard of Aesop’s fables. If the students are older, they may be familiar with the legends about the Greek and Roman gods.

Lead a discussion about the similarities and differences between the legends of different cultures.

## ***3. Legends for a New Age***

Write the following titles on a board for the class to read:

How Reindeer Got His Antlers

Why Spring Follows Winter

Why the Rose has Thorns

How Beaver Got His Tail

Let each student choose a title and write a legend to go with it. Variation: Divide the class into groups to work together in writing the tales.



# THE WALNUT-CRACKER

## *A Creek Legend*



Many, many years ago in western Georgia, there lived a Southeastern Creek-Hitchiti Indian named Walnut-cracker. Members of his tribe named him this because he spent many of his days at one place collecting, cracking and eating walnuts. He would crack the walnuts with a small stone. Every day, even into the evenings, Walnut-cracker sat and ate walnuts. For many years, this activity was all Walnut-cracker did until his death. When he died, the men of his tribe buried his body near the spot where Walnut-cracker had cracked and eaten his walnuts all those years.

One day, some time after the death of Walnut-cracker, a Creek brave was passing through the forest, near the spot where Walnut-cracker had laboured and died. There he discovered a large mound of walnuts and, as he was hungry, he sat himself down and cracked open several walnuts, eating the tasty nut meat. Later that same day, the Creek hunter returned and cracked open even more walnuts, eating them as well. While he sat and worked at Walnut-cracker's old spot, another Creek warrior happened to walk by and heard the sound of someone cracking walnuts. He approached and, peering through the evening darkness, thought he saw Walnut-cracker once more at his work.

Bewildered and surprised, the warrior ran back to his village and told the people that he had seen Walnut-cracker cracking walnuts once again at his old haunt. The man asked his people, "Could Walnut-cracker's ghost be at work?" The Creek warrior's family all decided

to visit the place where Walnut-cracker had lived. Were they surprised when they, too, saw someone squatting among the rocks, cracking walnuts? They, also, thought the man they saw was Walnut-cracker.

One member of the Creek warrior's family had been a good friend of Walnut-cracker. He was a lame man and asked his clansmen to carry him to the spot where Walnut-cracker's "ghost" had been spotted. "Carry me on your back," he asked. "I must see if the one you have seen is my friend Walnut-cracker.

So Lame Man was carried to the spot and he saw through the darkness a figure sitting cracking walnuts. "Take me closer," said Lame Man, and his bearer carried him closer. The hunter could not hear the men approaching since he was busy cracking walnuts. Still Lame Man told his carrier, "Take me even closer, so I may see him."

When Lame Man came very close to the mysterious figure, the hunter heard him approach and leapt up, taking his bow and arrows, running away. In surprise and fear, when the hunter leapt up and ran, so did those watching him. In fear, Lame Man's bearer dropped him and ran back to his village. Frightened, Lame Man jumped to his feet and ran to catch up with his people. It appeared that his fear had cured him of his lameness. In fact, he ran so fast that he outran everyone else, arriving back at their lodge before they arrived. After this frightful encounter, Lame Man was able to walk for the rest of his days.

As for Walnut-cracker, his "ghost" was never seen again.

# WHY POSSUM'S TAIL IS BARE

## *A Cherokee Legend*

Long ago in the beginning days of the world, Possum didn't look the way he does now. Creator gave Possum a beautiful, bushy, furry tail, and Possum was vain about his tail. He bragged about it all the time, and sang about it at every dance, until Rabbit (who didn't have much of a tail left since Bear had pulled it off) became jealous and decided to play a trick on Possum.

Rabbit went to the other animals and said, "Let's have an honor dance for Possum's tail." But all the other animals said, "We are tired of hearing Possum sing about his tail."

"If we have an honor dance for Possum," said Rabbit, "and we let him sing about his tail all night, perhaps he will not talk about it so much from now on." Well, the other animals said they had never thought about it quite like that, and maybe Rabbit was right. And so they agreed to have an honor dance for Possum's tail.

Rabbit traveled to Possum's house and gave him the news. "You mean I can sit where everyone can see me?" said Possum.

"Oh, yes," said Rabbit. "You will have a special seat of honor right next to the council fire."

"Do you mean I can sing and dance and talk about my tail all night?" asked Possum.

"Oh, yes," said Rabbit. "That's what the dance is for, to honor your beautiful tail!"

Well of course this pleased Possum very much, and he said that he would come. Rabbit said, "I will send Cricket to you on the day of the dance, to comb and brush the fur on your tail so it will look its best." Possum liked this idea as well.

So Rabbit went to Cricket, who is such an expert haircutter that the Cherokee word for him means "the barber." Rabbit told him exactly how to fix the hair on Possum's tail.

On the day of the dance, Cricket went to Possum's house. Possum stretched out and closed his eyes and Cricket began to comb and brush the fur on Possum's tail, until it was its silkiest and shiniest. "Possum," said Cricket, "I'm going to wind a red string around the fur on your tail, very very tight, all the way to the tip. It will keep the hair smooth until just before you dance!"

That night, when the sun went down, the drums began to play and the singers to call. Everyone gathered at the council house. Possum sat in a special seat of honor, right next to the council fire, where the light was brightest.

Soon the other animals began to call, "Possum, dance! Possum, dance!" So Possum reached around behind him and pulled off the red string. With that, every hair on his tail fell off, but Possum didn't know it. He leaped into the circle of firelight and began to dance, singing, "See my beautiful bushy, furry tail!" The animals began to laugh. Possum sang "See how it sweeps the ground!" And the animals laughed louder.

Possum decided maybe they hadn't heard him right, and so he sang louder, and the animals laughed harder. Finally, Possum was so surprised and humiliated, all he could do was fall to the ground and grin helplessly, which Possum still does whenever you take him by surprise. And Possum's grandchildren all have red, skinny, hairless tails to this very day.